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Prosecution of Students 'Inconceivable,' Says CIA

By BEN A. FRANKLIN

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WASHINGTON—A spokesman of the Central Intelligence Agency said Sunday it was "inconceivable" that members of the National Student Association who disclosed their secret relationship with the CIA would be prosecuted for their unauthorized revelations.

Lawrence R. Houston, general counsel of the CIA, said in a telephone interview that "we have talked about that and there is to be no retribution, no prosecution."

"Of course, we don't like what has happened," Houston said. "And we certainly don't mean that the decision not to prosecute gives these people carte blanche to discuss anything further they may know that is of a confidential nature. There is some information we think they should plainly not discuss."

Houston's comments were a departure from the usual policy of CIA officials. In the past most CIA officials have declined any

comment to newsmen. But Houston made it clear Sunday that he sought to reassure NSA officers or staff members that there would be no criminal prosecution.

"These boys were driven into a corner where they had to say something," he commented. He did not elaborate.

According to NSA officers, members of the student organization who had knowledge of the CIA's financial support or who agreed to cooperate with the agency in collecting information abroad were required to sign a security agreement that firmly prohibited any disclosures, intentionally or through "negligence." Information that was not to be disclosed included the fact of the CIA's interest in the NSA or in individual members, as well as the nature and details of CIA operations involving students.

The security oath, a copy of which was obtained Sunday from non-student sources, includes a warning that "intentional or negligent violation of this secrecy agreement may subject me to prosecution under the espionage laws of the United States of America."

Houston said Sunday that "the key word is 'may.'" "we would have to show intent to harm the United States by giving information to a foreign power," he said. "I don't think we could do that in this case."

The CIA lawyer said that it was probable that students involved in CIA projects had been asked to sign a secrecy agreement — "if not that one then something very similar."

Houston said that prosecution was "not at all automatic" in such cases. The text of the CIA agreement and the question of whether the agency might attempt to prosecute NSA officers who made disclosures about

relation with the student organization. An article on the CIA-NSA relationship is being published in the forthcoming March issue of Ramparts magazine.

STUDENTS 'TRAPPED'

In a statement last Friday, Sam Brown, a 23-year-old Harvard University divinity student and chairman of the NSA's 10-member national supervisory board, said that some members and staff officials of the student organization had been "trapped" into collecting "sensitive information" for the CIA by a process that involved the CIA security agreement and its implied threat of criminal prosecution for disclosure.

At the signing of such an agreement, Brown said, those involved were aware that they were to receive classified information "to help them in their work." But he said they were not aware until after they had signed that they would then be "working for the CIA."

Brown said that the "ethical trap" in which these students found themselves stemmed from their signature of the agreement. "Honest people acting out of the best of motives were faced with an impossible choice," he said. They had to choose between "exposing the relationship and thereby harming themselves and hundreds of others or remaining quiet and thereby being dishonest to new generations of students."

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